Desert Falcons

Mr. J. Mavrogordato, ably supported by a trained Saker and Lanner brought home from the Sudan, gave members a most interesting talk in his usual entertaining style. There is no such species as a true desert falcon, but he proposed to talk about the two species present. The Saker, he considered to be related to the Gyr, but the Lanner he thought was closer to the Peregrine. For instance, the Saker does not hunt by stooping, but by flying low and extremely fast, which is very different from the normal method of the Peregrine, but similar to the Gyr. He had seen a Saker "stalking" a pair of Sand Grouse at speed in the Sudan this winter, the birds rising and escaping just in time.

Sakers are considerably more intelligent than Peregrines and to a lesser extent, so are Lanners. A Lanneret released in 1950 in the Sudan, after being used to falconry, was still about this year and recognized Mr. Mavrogordato, but would let no other human anywhere near.

Both species are very difficult to catch and it had taken the speaker his eleven years in the Sudan to learn how to do it. The method depends upon their propensity to rob weaker species, as for instance, a Brown-necked Raven, a Kestrel or ideally a Pallid Harrier. These species are made to carry a small lure armed with numerous nooses in which the falcon becomes caught.

Using this method, he discovered that Egyptian Vultures were also keen robbers of smaller species, but the worst of all were the eagles. These were a considerable problem as they were always to be found in the same area as the falcons and will go to all lengths to get the lure, even if it only contains a dead sparrow.

A New Species of Lark from Kenya

by Mr. J. D. Macdonald

Received 3rd February, 1956

Mr. J. G. Williams of the Coryndon Museum, Nairobi, collected in June 1955 on the south-west slopes of Marsabit four specimens of lark which seem to represent an undescribed species. They belong to the genus *Mirafra*. They are not readily identified as a colour phase or geographical variant of any known species of *Mirafra*. They are not likely to be, for instance, a colour phase of the very variable *M. rufocinnamomea* for their dimensions and bill shape are not identical with specimens of that species taken in the same locality; also Williams noted that "*rufocinnamomea* is a great skulker and one can rarely see the bird after it has alighted, whereas there was no difficulty in locating this other lark on the ground; often it would run after alighting and dodge behind bushes but sooner or later it would appear and walk across some open patch." He suggested that the specimens might represent true *rufocinnamomea* (which, then, would not be conspecific with *fischeri*) a likely possibility in these *Mirafra* larks which can be very similar in the hand but quite different in the field. But the type of *M. rufocinnamomea* was examined by Captain C. H. B. Grant in 1938 who noted (in MS) that it is a close match with the type of *M. torrida* Shelley in the British Museum (Nat. Hist.), which is considered to be

conspecific with *rufocinnamomea*; the markings and general appearance of the upperparts are similar although the colour is rather less bright rufous, and the underparts are an exact match.

Williams also observed that "its field appearance was rather like that of *M. africanoides*, but unlike that species I did not see it alight in bushes, but always on the ground, often near a bush, around which it would run after alighting." Dr. H. Friedmann, who examined a specimen, says that it reminds him of an *africanoides*. But Williams found birds clearly identifiable as *africanoides* in the same locality and the specimens are not dimensionally the same, as one would expect them to be if they represented a colour phase of that species.

Another possibility considered was that they might be geographical variants of *M. albicauda*, but although their dimensions are fairly close to that species they are not a neat morphological fit with specimens on the table. Williams states that in his experience "*albicauda* always occurs in thick or high grass, flushes usually from near one's feet and has a characteristic flight when it goes away," whereas these new birds were "in areas where there is a certain amount of grass and small bushes, but also open patches of sandy soil: in other words in an overgrazed area."

There remained the possibility that the specimens might match either Friedmann's *Mirafra candida*, from the northern Guaso Niyro River, Kenya Colony, or *M. pulpa* from the Sagon River, southern Abyssinia, both of which were considered by Praed and Grant to be synonymous with *M. cantillans*. Dr. Friedmann kindly compared a specimen with the types of these forms and thought that it might be related to *M. pulpa*. However, it is, apparently, not a good match; he gives differences as great as those separating many other species in this genus and as the validity of *pulpa* itself has been questioned it seems that little can be gained by putting the two together in a species by themselves.

In general appearance, as museum specimens, it seems to me that they are most like *M. cordofanica* of Kordofan and Darfur in the Sudan. Williams is not acquainted in the field with that rather little known species and comparisons with meagre records of habits and ecology are not helpful. It is possible that these new Marsabit birds may be phylogenetically nearest *cordofanica* but because of the wide geographical gap and the distinct morphological differences between them – and also the lack of a modern revision of the genus *Mirafra* – it seems better at this stage to focus attention on the birds by giving them specific status. The species is named after Mr. Williams who has made such valuable contributions to East African ornithology.

Mirafra williamsi new species

Description: General colour of the upperparts more or less uniform brown, a colour sometimes described as Verona-brown or snuff-brown; the centres of most feathers slightly darker, this dark area being diffuse not sharply contrasting. The inner secondaries and central tail feathers sepia or dark cinnammon-brown; at the bases of the broad pale margins there are blackish lines, but much of these marginal features are abraded in old plumage. The bases and centres of the outer webs of most of the primaries are plain cinnamon-rufous as in the majority of *Mirafra* species. Throat nearly white; breast dark vinaceous-buff with darker triangular

markings; belly pinkish-buff; in the tail feathers the outer pair are pinkish-buff on outer web, rachis and most of the distal half of the inner web; second pair are pinkish-buff on distal half of outer web and tip of inner web; the remaining rectrices, other than the central pair, are dark sepia.

The bill is slightly deeper in relation to length than in other *Mirafra* of similar dimensions; although the measured difference of bill depth is only 1–2 mm. the stouter appearance is quite clear to the eye in compared specimens. Details of dimensions are: Wing, ♂ 84, ♀ 83; first primary, exposed length about 20 mm.; Tail, ♂ 54, 56, ♀ 53; Bill length (from skull), ♀♂ 15; depth, 7–8; tarsus, ♂♀ 22–24; hind claw, ♂♀ 8–10.

Colour of non-feathered parts, ♂♀: bill, above greyish horn, below pinkish-white; legs, pinkish-white; iris, brown.

Type: Adult male nearing completion of post-breeding moult: from Marsabit, Kenya Colony; lat. 2° 20′ N; long. 37° 55′ E; alt. 3,000ft.: collected by J. G. Williams on 20th June, 1955: B.M. reg. no. 1956: 6: 1.

Remarks: Three other specimens were taken in the same locality and on the same date. A second male was just commencing moult and a third was in full moult; a female was fairly well advanced in moult. Stomach contents seeds. The male in full moult is in the Coryndon Museum, and the other two specimens are in the British Museum along with the type.

I am grateful to Captain C. H. B. Grant and Mrs. B. P. Hall for examining the specimens with me; and to Dr. H. Friedmann and Mr. C. M. N. White for various comments.

Spine-Tailed Swifts of the Old World

by David Lack

Received 8th February, 1956

A revision of the genera of swifts (Lack 1956a) and of the species of *Apus* (Lack 1956b) resulted in so many changes from Peters (1940), that I thought a survey of the Old World species of *Chaetura* (in the wide sense) desirable. Happily no changes in specific nomenclature seem needed, but I felt this fact should be placed on record. I worked with the extensive series in the British Museum (Natural History) together with specimens of *C. ussheri marwitzi* and *C. melanopygia* loaned by the museums of Berlin, Stockholm and Chicago, to whom I am most grateful. For reasons given elsewhere (Lack 1956a) I treat all the Old World spine-tails in one genus; 8 genera have at times been used for the 13 or 14 species involved.

As pointed out by Amadon (1953), the West African *C. sabini* is close to *thomensis* of San Thomé, also to *sylvatica** of India and *leucopygialis* of Malaya, while *grandidieri* of Madagascar is only a little further removed. These five forest forms are allopatric, and extremely similar in size and proportions, while the first four are very similar and the last fairly similar in colour, the most prominent difference being in the length of the (usually white) upper tail coverts. The differences between them might be regarded as subspecific, but they do not overlap, so I suggest that they should provisionally be retained as five monotypic and

*D. Amadon writes that he miscalled this species *mystacalis*.